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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: SECRETARY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE DISCUSSES MINDANAO  
PEACE AND SECURITY WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: MANILA 2072

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a September 17 private breakfast with the Ambassador, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro said that the Philippine military was still pressing the fight against rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leaders in Mindanao, whose attacks against civilians and government forces over the last month had led to thousands of displaced residents and a tenuous security situation in the conflict affected areas of the island. Teodoro agreed that it was important to reestablish the peace process between the government and the MILF, but said the government would need to bolster police presence and better integrate law enforcement with military forces to ensure security in advance of renewed peace negotiations with the MILF leadership. While emphasizing that the Philippine military was having success, Teodoro noted that the conflict had strained the armed forces' logistical capability and said that should another natural disaster strike the Philippines in the next few months, the government might request USG assistance. The Ambassador thanked Secretary Teodoro for public comments by him and senior military leaders over the last week regarding the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the temporary nature of U.S. military presence in the Philippines. The Ambassador expressed concern about the Supreme Court hearing on custody of Marine LCpl Daniel Smith scheduled for September 19, registering our concern that if the court took an activist stance, the hearing could metastasize into a broader referendum on the constitutionality of the VFA. Teodoro acknowledged the current political and media sensitivity surrounding the U.S.-Philippine military relationship and said that upcoming bilateral events such as the Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board meeting on September 26 would have to be low profile to avoid negative fallout. Teodoro closed by addressing the longstanding threat of the New People's Army (NPA), saying that their actions had proven the NPA was no longer an organization with an ideology and, consequently, they should be treated as criminals, not rebels. END SUMMARY.

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SECURITY IN MINDANAO NECESSARY FOR PEACE TALKS  
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12. (C) During a private breakfast with the Ambassador September 17, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro said that the Philippine military still was intensively engaged in the hunt for the two rebel Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) commanders who had unleashed a series of attacks on civilians and government forces following the breakdown of peace talks in August (reftel). Teodoro said he did not see the fighting ending in the

immediate future, as the MILF guerrillas had changed tactics and were using ambushes and smaller units to attack the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), whereas earlier the MILF was massing forces and suffering high casualties. Secretary Teodoro said that President Arroyo had made the conflict in Mindanao a top priority and was traveling there September 18 to meet with military commanders and assess firsthand the government's handling of internally displaced persons. The Ambassador reiterated that it was important to reestablish the peace process as soon as possible and Teodoro agreed, but said that in order to protect the civilian population from both Christian vigilante forces and rogue MILF insurgents, a more robust police presence -- coupled with stronger cooperation between law enforcement and the military -- would be necessary in Mindanao. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG had been looking at ways to help improve police capacity to complement U.S. assistance to the Armed Forces.

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MILITARY OPERATIONS IMPACTING DISASTER RESPONSE CAPABILITY  
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¶3. (C) The Ambassador remarked that the logistical operations of the AFP had been impressive to date. Teodoro said that although the AFP had performed very well in moving their forces and managing the conflict, including minimizing civilian casualties, he was concerned about the military's ability to sustain operations from a resupply standpoint in the aftermath of losing one of their C-130 aircraft on August 125. Teodoro said the loss of the aircraft and the focus on Mindanao had temporarily stretched the ability of the AFP to respond to other demands, and that if the Philippines

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suffered another large natural disaster in the next few months, the Philippine government might have to call on the USG for assistance. At the same time, Teodoro underscored to the Ambassador that the Philippines was mobilizing its civilian and military planning machinery in preparations for next year's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Disaster Relief exercise, which will be co-hosted by the USG and Philippines. Teodoro said disaster assistance was a major focus of the Philippine government and they believed the exercise would be valuable for all ARF participants.

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CONCERN OVER THE VFA AND USG-PHILIPPINE MILITARY RELATIONS  
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¶4. (C) The Ambassador thanked Secretary Teodoro for public comments he and senior military leaders had made over the last week regarding the U.S.-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the temporary nature of U.S. military presence in the Philippines. Teodoro, Chief of the Armed Forces General Alexander Yano, and other military commanders have made numerous press statements rebutting allegations of a permanent U.S. military presence in the Philippines and emphasizing that both countries gain great benefits from approved bilateral military activities conducted under the VFA. At the same time, the Ambassador told Teodoro that the USG was concerned that the September 19 hearing on a civil suit regarding the custody of Marine LCpl Daniel Smith could turn into a broader discussion on the constitutionality of the VFA and the presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG takes the VFA very seriously, has always closely adhered to the provisions of the agreement, and that we fully expect Smith to remain in U.S. government custody until all judicial proceedings have been completed.

¶5. (C) Teodoro agreed that the current political and media attention on U.S.-Philippine military relations had heightened sensitivity towards the presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines, but stressed that the United States is the closest military partner of the Philippines and that the government would continue to support our military-military

engagement. He said it was good that U.S. troops had been able to play a supporting role in Mindanao without being associated with the conflict. However, Teodoro said that upcoming bilateral events such as the Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board meeting on September 26 and the Talon Vision/Phiblex combat training exercise in October would have to be managed with an eye toward potential negative reaction in the press or among opposition politicians.

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NPA -- "NO IDEOLOGICAL BASE"  
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16. (C) Teodoro concluded by raising the Philippine government's ongoing battle with the New People's Army (NPA), saying that the NPA no longer could make claims to an ideology. Communism is a dead movement, said Teodoro, and the government was not helping itself by continuing to refer to the NPA as communists. Teodoro insisted that the Communist Party of the Philippines and NPA forfeited their legitimacy long ago and they were no more than common criminals now, "bandits that should be handled as a law enforcement problem." The Ambassador expressed concern over the Philippine government's preference for citing the number of NPA fronts dismantled and monthly tallies for NPA members arrested or killed. The methodology was dangerous, the Ambassador said, because it could lead to accusations of human rights violations if police and military commanders felt pressured to generate ever higher reports of insurgents apprehended. Teodoro said he appreciated and agreed with the Ambassador's comments and that Philippine authorities were continuing to stress respect for human rights as a fundamental principle of government and the security forces.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) The Philippine military has expended a great deal of resources fighting lawless MILF elements over the last month, and it may be difficult for them to maintain momentum as the MILF increasingly resorts to guerrilla tactics. Logistical support for the Philippine troops has become a problem with the loss of the C-130, and as the fighting continues, the

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military may have a diminished capacity to conduct effective operations. Philippine officials recognize that security forces are limited in their ability to reestablish security by these logistical constraints, but also realize that if the rogue MILF commanders are not captured, the conflict could morph into a low-level, but protracted three-way fight between the Philippine forces, civilian militias, and MILF commandos. While President Arroyo, senior Philippine officials, and the military leadership are committed to an integrated security strategy that uses law enforcement and military elements to restore order in Mindanao as quickly as possible, the challenge will be for the Philippine government to prosecute the campaign against the rogue MILF commanders who instigated the conflict without alienating the overall MILF leadership, which appears legitimately to seek peace.  
END COMMENT.  
KENNEY